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ABSTRACT

To ensure that the rapidly growing climbing gym industry maintains the excellent safety record established so far, the Climbing Gym Association (CGA) has developed the Peer Review and Accreditation Program, a process of review between qualified and experienced CGA reviewers and a climbing facility operator to assess the facility's risk management and operational practices. The CGA has published a list of accepted industry practices (AIP's), which have been approved by the membership and are continually updated. Standards will be further developed by the Peer Review and Accreditation Program. This paper presents observations on procedures and practices drawn from the accreditation manual: control of access; climber testing; monitoring by staff; staffing; management systems; insurance; equipment and maintenance; walls, anchors, and landing surfaces; operations manual; program activities and safety; emergency procedures; and outdoor programs. In discussing staffing concerns, it is noted that a strong tradition of mentoring and apprenticeship, coupled with very low turnover, is an important factor in the exemplary safety record established by U.S. climbing schools and guide services. University climbing programs are also challenged by the dual goals of providing adventure recreation and education with maximum safety and developing leadership skills amongst student staff. The CGA is a useful organization for university climbing programs to join because the process of an accreditation review and the maintenance of an accredited status help maintain continuity of staff professionalism and risk management practices. (Includes the Climbing Gym Association's mission statement and eight accepted industry practices.) (TD)

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ED 419 651

Accreditation for Indoor Climbing Facilities

Robert Jones

By

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A few years ago, the idea that a majority of climbing lessons and experiences would occur on manufactured climbing walls was hard to imagine. This idea has come to be a reality for the sport of climbing. The number of user days on manufactured walls in the US is staggering. Equally impressive is the safety record that this young industry has established. Imagine the countless numbers of figure 8 knots tied by novices in often distracting environments. It is truly amazing (and statistically improbable considering participant volume) that there has been, to date, no major accident, claim, lawsuit, or payout.

It is inevitable that someday our industry will deal with serious accidents and the scrutiny of our litigious society. With this in mind, and in pursuit of the goal of promoting effective risk management in the climbing gym industry, the Climbing Gym Association (CGA) has developed the Peer Review and Accreditation Program. The program is a process of review and dialogue between a team of qualified and experienced CGA reviewers and a climbing facility operator to assess the effectiveness of the facility's risk management and operational practices.

We are often asked "what are the standards?". Currently the CGA has published a list of Accepted Industry Practices (AIP's) which have been approved by the membership and are continually updated. Beyond the AIP's, the standards are open to interpretation. The Peer Review and Accreditation program is an effective base from which further standards will develop. The programs peer reviewers represent some of the most experienced climbing wall operators in the industry.

The CGA is a useful organization for university climbing wall programs to join. Even with the staff turnover intrinsic to a university program, the process of an accreditation review and the maintenance of an accredited status would help with the effectiveness and continuity of risk management practices.

The following is a list of headings from the Topics for Review as shown in the attached accreditation manual. I offer the following observations on accepted procedures and practices from the six peer reviews I have conducted as well as insights drawn from ten years of indoor climbing development and twenty years of outdoor guiding. The opinions expressed are my own in collaboration with many others. A major goal of the CGA is the encouragement of diverse opinion, and all input and opinion is sought. Speak up, get involved, and be safe!

Access

Control of Access

Control of access can be accomplished by proper positioning and design of the front desk and the sound policies and clear boundaries between observation areas and climbing areas.

Duty to Notify

Duty to notify means that all participants have been given enough accurate information to be reasonably assume the risks inherent in the sport of rock

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climbing. This can be accomplished through signage such as the Climb Smart! program, clearly posted rules, liability release forms, and especially by the information imparted by the front-line staff.

Special care should be taken with off-site parents and go-between outfitters like day camps. What information are you sending out with your liability release forms? Are all liability release forms for youth signed by a parent or legal guardian?

Documentation and Liability Release Forms

Proper handling of information means that all participants have some documented qualification status (safety test results) and a signed waiver/release/assumption of risk form that has been written to comply with local laws. All information should be easily accessible.

Testing

The heart of climbing wall risk management is the qualification system, often called the safety check or belay test. The test should be thorough and should include the climbers demonstration of:

1. putting on the harness,
2. tying in with a figure eight follow through knot, and
3. proper belay and lowering technique.

The most effective tests we have observed involved a live test (actual person gets belayed) and very skilled staff. A key issue is who can take a test, or pre-qualification. When is the test given? It is preferred that students take the test on a follow up visit rather than the same night as the beginning lesson. The close of a safety check is the ideal time for the staff member to explain all rules and relevant safety information.

Monitoring

When conducting an accreditation review reviewers prefer to observe a gym during a busy evening. Supervising a busy climbing gym is an art requiring both observation and intuition. Through the reviewers' own observations and interviews with employees they look for areas of higher risk, an awareness throughout the staff of high risk spots and near miss incidents. The key to successful staff supervision of climbing walls is ongoing training and effective, rapid communication throughout the entire staff. It is particularly important that all staff hear immediately about near misses, accidents, and changes in policy or procedures.

Staffing

The climbing facilities that I have looked at hold safety as the primary core value of their operation. These organizations tend to hire and keep the most experienced climbing staff they can find. In many ways the indoor climbing industry was allowed to flourish because of the exemplary safety record that US climbing schools and guide services have established. A strong tradition of mentoring and apprenticeship, coupled with very low turnover, means that guides in these organizations grow in their skills and learn more regarding safety each year. Contrast this process to that of the store front fitness club with a rotating cast of young, low paid front desk workers. Unfortunately many new wall operators, concerned only with making a profit, choose the latter model to emulate. University programs are challenged by the dual goals of providing adventure recreation and education with maximum safety, as well as developing leadership skills amongst student staff. These sometimes contrasting goals can be achieved provided that the

program is blessed with experienced, committed leaders who hold program safety and the continuity of staff professionalism as primary core values.

One of the more controversial issues right now in our industry is the use of volunteers or "trade members". In exchange for free membership, people work for free and provide the various services offered at a climbing wall. Though attractive as a means to save labor costs, this practice would be difficult to justify when faced with a claim or lawsuit. Imagine explaining to a jury why some of the program belayers are thoroughly trained and others are not; being in violation of laws relating to workers compensation insurance would not help the case. The bottom line is that all staff need to be qualified and thoroughly trained. There should be a plan for staff trainings. These trainings should be well documented.

Management Systems

See above. I look for the various ways that program managers stay in touch with the operation and the staff. Is there good communication throughout the organization? Are safety concerns dealt with in a forthright and timely fashion? Are new programs thoroughly reviewed?

Insurance

All programs offered by the climbing facility should be clearly covered under the policy.

Equipment and Maintenance

Indoor climbing tends to have higher use and have a harder impact on equipment than outdoor activities. Of primary importance is a schedule of inspection that is consistently followed and documented. Ropes are the most vulnerable to wear and should be inspected often. How often? Many gyms inspect their ropes, belay devices, and anchors every day prior to opening. Others will do a complete inspection once a week. Most important is that there is a clear policy that is consistently followed.

A common question involves the type of belay devices used (i.e. Gri-Gri's or ATC's) and how (e.g. in situ or checked out at the desk). Although there is no one "correct" device, with whatever devices that are used it is important for the facility to be thorough and consistent on its device and use policies, and its teaching methods regarding these devices. Having shortcuts to the classical safety system are not advisable, i.e. clipping into the rope rather than tying in, or belay devices that are permanently anchored to the floor and do not require direct connection to the belayer. The time that is saved by the climber might come at the expense of double checking by his/her partner or supervising staff.

Walls, Anchors, and Landing Surfaces

The CGA now insists that all accredited climbing wall programs have walls that have engineering documentation and proper building permits. The CGA reviewers are not qualified to test walls in the field but check to see that the project engineer was aware of the CWIG (Climbing Wall Industry Group) standards and that the walls are engineered in reference to those standards. Belay anchors are inspected and evaluated from the viewpoint of proper outdoor anchoring, the SRENE (secure, redundant, equalized, no extension) principle applies.

Since most of the busier wall operations in the US have provided impact attenuation material at the base of the wall, effective floor padding is considered to be the "standard of care" within our industry. Almost every wall has an "Achilles heel", an

area where the floor padding is less effective or impossible to fit given other requirements like the American Disabilities Act or building codes. Look to see if such an area can be improved or if there are any hazards that can be mitigated by course setting boundaries.

Operations Manual

The most important aspect of the manual is that it is consistent in word and practice and that the entire staff is well acquainted with it.

Program Activities and Safety

This is where reviewers look at the nuts and bolts of program risk management. What is the instructor/student ratio? Are students spotting each other while bouldering? Are new belayers backed up? Of particular concern these days is lead climbing. We have seen some programs where people are pushed into leading when they have been climbing only a very short time. Many programs cover the main climbing techniques effectively but fail to protect students from common sports injuries by giving them information on warming up, and the importance of rest and recovery time.

Another hot issue these days is the length of lessons. Many of the older more established climbing gyms have adopted two hours as a minimum time for a group beginning lesson. A new trend seems to be "quickie" belay lessons, sometimes lasting only for 20 minutes. More important than the actual length of time are the risk management practices employed, the degree to which new students are prepared to safely use the facility, and the follow-up by supervising staff of the student once the lesson is over.

Emergency Procedures

Once again training is the key. A staff that is periodically trained in emergency response by going through actual accident simulations will be much better prepared to deal with an emergency effectively and professionally. Current CPR and basic first aid certification are required for employees of health clubs and therefore of climbing gyms.

Outdoor Programs

The CGA Peer Review and Accreditation Program is for manufactured climbing wall operations. If an organization runs outdoor programs as well, the reviewers will consider the program to see if basic risk management criteria are met. If there are shortcomings in this regard, the accreditation may be withheld. If an outdoor program is deemed to be significant in terms of user days or revenues as an overall part of an operation, the program will be required to go through an outdoor accreditation review within a year of receiving accreditation from the CGA.

To those of us who came into operating climbing walls from a deep background in outdoor instruction and guiding, the idea of junior climbing gym employees passing themselves off to the public as outdoor climbing guides is horrifying. As our industry expands with hundreds of new climbing instructors teaching tens of thousands of new students, maintaining the tradition and safety standards of American climbing instruction is a critical challenge. We hope that the CGA Peer Review and Accreditation Program is a useful tool in helping us all meet that challenge and grow our sport responsibly.

Climbing Gym Association Mission Statement

The mission of the Climbing Gym Association is to promote responsible growth and professionalism within the climbing gym industry. The CGA will provide education and support services. The CGA will facilitate the exchange of information and ideas within the association and with other industry and climbing organizations.

ACCEPTED INDUSTRY PRACTICES

1. Duty to Notify
New customers must be qualified as to their climbing experience and knowledge of climbing safety practices. A qualified gym staff person should inform the customer of the risks inherent in climbing in a gym environment. The customer's knowledge and experience in safety belaying must be determined and they must be informed of the facility's rules and policies.

2. Age Restriction
A customer must be 18 years or older (legally an adult) to use the facility without a parent's or legal guardian's approval as designated by their signature on a release of liability form. Notes from parents are not sufficient. It is generally recommended that a minimum age restriction be established for unsupervised belaying.

3. Release of Liability
All customers must sign a release of liability form prior to using the facility. States have varying laws related to release of liability forms, and therefore, each gym operator should have their form reviewed for consistency with local statute.

4. Belay Check
Each climber must demonstrate their belay proficiency by completing a belay check prior to any unsupervised use of belay systems. The following steps are recommended. The customer should be asked to:

a. Demonstrate the proper application and use of a climbing harness. The harness should be a manufactured harness;
b. Tie in to the harness with a figure eight knot;
c. Demonstrate the proper belay Set-Up. The belay device, carabiner and rope are handed to the customer as separate pieces. Demonstrate proper belay commands and technique;
d. Double check climber's set-up for proper application of harness and appropriate tie-in to harness. The climber should double check the belayer's set-up for proper application of harness, belay device, carabiner and rope.
e. Read or be informed of all rules and policies related to climbing in the gym.

5. Supervision
There must be appropriate supervision by a qualified staff person during hours of operation to insure that policies and procedures am being observed.

6. Safety Records
Appropriate safety inspections should be conducted and documented. Incident/accident reports should be completed for all occurrences and maintained on file.

7. First aid and CPR
A minimum of one staff person that is certified in First Aid and CPR should be supervising the facility during hours of operation.

8. Staff Training
All staff should receive safety, general operations, and emergency medical response training. Training should be documented.